

**DATE:** Wednesday, May 21, 2003  
**PUBLICATION:** *The Californian* (Salinas, California)  
**TITLE:** "Virtuous veggies: Healthy eating can be quick and easy"  
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**PROGRAM:** Nutrition Network/Project LEAN

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Dressed like grapes on the vine, Christine Moss goes forth to preach the gospel of fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Eat those and you're less likely to eat junk food later," she said. "You're also getting your nutrition first." Moss is with the Monterey County Health Department's Nutrition Network/Project LEAN, Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition.

Eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day - the effort is called California 5 a Day Campaign -- is a proven way to cut the risk of cancer and other serious chronic diseases, Moss said.

Yet two-thirds of Californians fail to eat five servings, a California Department of Health Services survey found. One in three eat two or fewer servings, the report said. Thirty-five percent of children in the 28th Assembly District, which includes Monterey County, are overweight and physically unfit, a California Center for Public Health Advocacy report concluded earlier this year.

Surveys show that children believe French fries are a vegetable, Moss said. Moss calls fast-food fries "a spoon for fat."

She takes her message to daycare providers and foster parents.

She speaks to people in Salvation Army shelters and to migrant parents at Santa Lucia Elementary School in King City.

"The message is quick and healthy," Moss said. "Eat five or more fruits or vegetables and get 30 minutes of exercise a day for good health."

The sooner good eating habits start, the better, she said.

Heather Keithly, aka Sherry Strawberry, is part of the effort with the Food on the Run program. Keithly goes into high schools to urge policy changes regarding food on campus.

"Say you're having a fund raiser," she said. "Instead of selling chocolate bars, make it fruit cups." Add bottled water and 100 percent juice to the vending machines so students have a healthy choice, Keithly said.



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE CALIFORNIAN

*Christine Moss, left, and Heather Keithly dress up as fruit and preach healthy eating to Salinas.*

One of Food on the Run's projects is at Soledad High School. It's a publication aimed at making the Latino community more savvy about the foods they buy.

Almost any food on earth is on the supermarket shelf, of course. Americans need guidance in making the right choices, she said.

California 5 a Day is an excellent starting point, Moss said. Fruits and vegetables provide essential vitamins and minerals and fiber, she said. Fiber moves waste through the gut faster.

"So it has less time to do damage," she said.

Fruits and vegetables contain phyto-chemicals, cancer fighters, she said.

Choose an array, Moss suggested. The deeper the color, the healthier.

Spinach and kale are examples of deep-colored vegetables.

"Dark green. Bright red. Dark orange," Moss said. "The deeper the color, the higher the nutritive value."

Progress toward healthier eating is being made, Moss and Keithly said. Fresh fruit and vegetable options, for example, are emerging at fast-food outlets.

"It's getting better," Moss said.

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